

# Voting in Newfoundland and Labrador: Turned off by Canadian Elections? Tune in to *Canadian Idol*!

ALEX MARLAND

NEWFOUNDLANDERS AND LABRADORIANS are among the least likely of all Canadians to vote in a federal election. By comparison, turnout in the three nearby Maritime provinces regularly exceeds the national average. Yet Atlantic Canadians seem to share a common interest in supporting their own in national reality television programs that allow repeat voting, usually by telephone, in elimination rounds as part of a televised talent search.

This article argues that there can be political undertones when Canadians vote as part of the reality television experience. The popularity of CTV's *Canadian Idol* contrasts declining engagement in Canadian federal politics. Exploratory data gathered at an *Idol* audition in St. John's provides preliminary insights about tele-voting and about young persons' motivations for becoming contestants. This can help gauge undercurrents of political identity among *Idol* fans who do not participate in federal elections in Canada, particularly in Newfoundland and Labrador.

## TURNOUT IN CANADIAN FEDERAL ELECTIONS

Official turnout in Canadian federal elections has fallen to new lows in four of the last five contests, including in 2008 when it dipped below 60 percent for the first time. Generally speaking, non-voters are less likely to be on the official list of electors, but are more likely to have lower income, to be new to the country, to have lived a shorter period of time in a community, and to not be contacted by a political party (Blais et al. 2003; Pammett and LeDuc 2003b). Attitudinal measures such as

sense of civic duty and political interest are also strongly correlated with turnout, but an elector's age is the strongest predictor of voting in Canada. Young adults are by far the least likely to vote and the trend of falling participation among that group is expected to continue. Among the young are political dropouts who pay so little attention to politics that they lack sufficient knowledge to make political decisions (Milner 2007). In Pammett and LeDuc's view, Canada is faced with "a younger generation withdrawing or partially withdrawing from politics" (2003a, 11) that votes for the first time at a later age than earlier generations did, leading them to caution that, "a syndrome of non-participation is in danger of developing" (2006, 14). Collectively this points to a civic society in decline (Martinez and Gill 2006).

Many of the indicators of elector malaise exist in Newfoundland and Labrador (hereafter "Newfoundland,") including lower literacy, lower formal education rates, lower income, lower economic development, and lower population density than the Canadian average. Furthermore, attitudinal measures would probably unearth a detachment from Ottawa-based politics. Since joining Canada in 1949, a mean of 60.7 percent of registered Newfoundland electors have voted in federal elections, with less than half voting in 2004 and in 2008 (Table 1). This has been well below the national average and, with one exception, has always been less than in the other nine provinces. Newfoundlanders' motivations to vote have been explained as functions of the strength of patronage politics and by leaders' paternalistic dispositions (Perlin 1974) whereas the low turnout has been attributed to a lack of tight races (Scarrow 1961), low socio-demographic indicators, and reduced levels of political interest (Andrew 2005). As well, federal participation can be publicly discouraged in Newfoundland, as it was during Premier Danny Williams' "anything but Conservative" (or "ABC") campaign in 2008.

## REALITY TV AND CANADIAN IDOL

Conversely, the repeat voting allowed on reality TV contests increases voters' sense of efficacy and such programs' content may appeal to the same cohorts who are not engaged in federal elections. These television shows feature untrained participants who appear to deliver unrehearsed performances with spontaneous dialogue in snippets of "real life" situations or competitions, in contrast to tightly scripted professional politicians. There has been considerable local interest, including by provincial politicians, in supporting Newfoundlanders and their communities in Canadian reality shows ranging from CTV's *Popstars: The One* (won by Chamberlains' native Christa Borden in 2003) to CBC's *Hockeyville* (created in 2006). There has also been online participation in international contests such as *The New 7 Wonders of Nature* campaign (in 2008). During Port aux Basques's 2008 attempt

**Table 1**  
**Federal Election Turnout (%) in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1949-2008**

Election Year	Turnout in Canada*	Turnout in NL	Gap	Provincial Rank
1949	73.8	57.7	-16.1	10th
1953	67.5	57.4	-10.1	10th
1957	74.1	51.9	-22.2	10th
1958	79.4	78.6	-0.8	7th
1962	79.0	72.0	-7.0	10th
1963	79.2	68.8	-10.4	10th
1965	74.8	65.6	-9.2	10th
1968	75.7	68.0	-7.7	10th
1972	76.7	63.1	-13.6	10th
1974	71.0	57.7	-13.3	10th
1979	75.7	60.0	-15.7	10th
1980	69.3	58.9	-10.4	10th
1984	75.3	65.5	-9.8	10th
1988	75.3	67.8	-7.5	10th
1993	70.9	55.1	-15.8	10th
1997	67.0	55.2	-11.8	10th
2000	64.1	57.1	-7.0	10th
2004	60.5	49.3	-11.2	10th
2006	64.7	56.7	-8.0	10th
2008	58.8	47.7	-11.1	10th
(Mean)	(71.6%)	(60.7%)	(-10.9%)	—

\*all Canadian registered electors, including Newfoundland residents.

Source: Calculated from Feigert (1989) and Elections Canada data.

to win *Hockeyville*, for example, the province's minister of tourism pleaded: "Vote early, vote often. Newfoundlanders and Labradorians are well-known for supporting our own in these competitions" (Newfoundland and Labrador 2008). None of these competitions, however, has captured the public's attention as has *Canadian Idol*.

*Idol* is a hybrid of talent show, talk show and "docusoap" that is simple in structure, upbeat and glitzy. In 2001, Britain's *Pop Idol* voting drama put a grassroots twist on the nationalistic and kitschy Eurovision Song Contest that has been running since 1956, and the next year *American Idol* became a ratings phenomenon in the USA. The franchise then branched off into dozens of local versions throughout the world. In

Canada, each spring from 2003 to 2008 (CTV put the Canadian version on hiatus in 2009), the fanfare associated with a new season of *American Idol* was followed by auditions to recruit *Canadian Idol* contestants, 16-28 years old, in roughly a dozen cities across the country. Four celebrity judges whittled down participants to a handful of semi-finalists. The televised competition aired twice a week from late May to mid-September during which time it was a ratings leader and a social phenomenon.

*Idol*'s target viewing audience was initially people 12-24 years old, but in its first year *Canadian Idol* was the most watched television series in Canadian history. Moreover, it was regularly the most watched show by viewers 2-54 years old (CTV 2006; Jenkins 2006).<sup>1</sup> Girls and women were a key audience; to attract them, the show used gendered approaches and features such as fashion, low key hosts, state-of-the-art technology, melodramatic soap operas, talk shows, game shows, repetition, a focus on human relationships, and low production values (Meehan 2002). Ratings were lower in Canada's major metropolitan submarkets, but interest was often intense in smaller regional markets (BBM 2007; Vlessing 2007).

The high ratings can be explained in part by the participatory nature of *Idol*, which generated community interest. Phone numbers, such as "Phone 1-866-9-IDOL-01" or "text to 436501," were displayed on screen when semi-finalists performed an abridged version of a familiar song. Televoting, which occurred during a 9-11pm window in viewers' east or west time zone, was toll-free; alternatively, a SMS (short message service, or "text") could be sent for 50 cents. Due to repeat voting, over 30 million votes were phoned in per season with local phone carriers sometimes unable to handle the high volume of calls.<sup>2</sup> The contestant with the fewest votes was eliminated each week and the grand finale revealed the elected winner. CTV has refused to release detailed voting data but, based on viewing statistics, we can calculate that the average *Canadian Idol* viewer voted roughly twice per week for ten weeks.

Even competing media organizations reported updates about a local contestant's progress and discussed associated social phenomena across Canada. This included news of voting at pay phones in St. John's, the repeated theft of road signs on a highway route renamed "Casey's Way" after a New Brunswick contestant, emergency officials in Medicine Hat vexing over delayed dial tones, and attention paid to the 1,500 hopefuls who lined up in Toronto to audition in 2007 or the hundreds of youth who showed up amidst a snowstorm in Ottawa in 2008. Politicians across Canada, particularly in smaller centres, also chimed in. They urged constituents to support their local contestant, inquired of CTV how they could become involved, participated in *Idol* parties, joined in photo-ops, invited contestants to formal political events, and attended the show in Toronto. Community support that had grown into provincial support sometimes turned regional. For example, in 2008, advertising urging readers to "vote often" for a finalist who was "making Cape Breton, Nova Scotia & Atlantic Canada proud," appeared in Newfoundland newspapers that were affiliated with Transcontinental's *Cape Breton Post* ("Vote for Mitch" 2008).

Much of the *Idol* franchise's appeal is that it creates instant celebrities out of everyday folk. Singers project modesty through backstage footage which reveals their hopes and fears. Biographical features remind us how close these "kids next door" remain true to their ordinary social class despite their newfound fame. Participants confess their emotions in free flowing language while the on-air banter with judges and video diaries project authenticity, credibility, integrity and trustworthiness (Aslama and Pantti 2006). Supporters are thanked for voting and there is a shared sense of accomplishment or defeat. The contestants become entangled in an "ordinary/extraordinary paradox" (Holmes 2004, 157), in which television viewers prefer contestants who are unordinary people. They are charismatic and physically attractive, yet act unpretentious, and thus develop a rapport with viewers.

Each musical performance becomes a shared public experience. People are reminded of the show multiple times a day through different mediums, resulting in inevitable discussions about it. *Idol* viewers may chat about the latest performances or congregate online by way of e-mail, in chat rooms, through Web logs (blogs) and fan Web sites, further contributing to the word of mouth and gossip that are critical for the success of television events (Biressi and Nunn 2005; Coutas 2006; Franck and Nüesch 2007). Viewers may develop an emotional attachment to contestants, have a sense of responsibility for their success or failure and develop a feeling of community without leaving home. Generating such emotional reactions is part of the producers' application of what van Zoonen and Jenkins refer to as "affective economics" to attract loyal fan communities (van Zoonen 2004; Jenkins 2006). Entertainment becomes arousing with each successive round as viewers become more determined to do what they can to get their candidate 'elected.'

For all this, we know little about Canadian reality TV voters and nothing about how politically aware *Canadian Idol* contestants and viewers are. There is some evidence that *Idol* stirs identity politics. *American Idol* audiences relate to contestants on the basis of region, ethnicity and religion rather than on singing ability; viewers, particularly blacks, seem more likely to support contestants of their own race (Lee 2006; Kingston 2007). The *Idol* series is also believed to be in tune with people who feel disconnected from politics (Paskoff 2003); however, we know relatively little about viewers' demographics or their voting behaviour.<sup>3</sup>

## NEWFOUNDLAND'S INTEREST IN CANADIAN IDOL

As with other small regional communities, homegrown *Idol* singers in Newfoundland have become household names. That a Newfoundlander placed fifth or better, including two runners-up, in the first four seasons suggests that pan-Canadian votes were supplemented by a provincial voting bloc. Given its citizens' low turnout in federal elections, Newfoundland is therefore a good location for a case study profile.

Newfoundlanders' sense of political identity invokes local pride but also insecurity on larger stages. These feelings existed at least a decade before the colony joined Canada, when journalist Joseph Smallwood hosted the "Barrelman" radio program, on which he often referred to his listeners' cultural inferiority complex (Dettmer 1991; Hiscock 1994). In particular, he elevated "common folk" to a higher status by featuring them on his radio show and making heroes out of Newfoundlanders who achieved success elsewhere. Newfoundlanders' nationalistic emotions continue to be stirred whenever one of their own has challenged outsiders. The only federal election (1958, see Table 1) in which Newfoundland did not have the lowest turnout was when Smallwood, as Premier, waged a national publicity campaign to demand more money under the Terms of Union with Canada. Subsequent premiers have also battled Ottawa, most recently Danny Williams over the Atlantic Accord, while non-political pursuits from seal hunting to curling have also generated nationalist support. In all cases, Newfoundlanders hold firm on a larger stage with their compatriots' support communicated through radio and other mass media.<sup>4</sup>

Newfoundlanders' sense of identity involves ethnic pluralism. They maintain their distinctiveness within Canada's federal system, having complementary dual political roles while contributing to a larger society. Political undertones exist in local music, such as the singing of the *Ode to Newfoundland* or *Ode to Labrador* anthems at public events; a song in which a Canadian Mountie being outsmarted when he eats stolen mutton; or in residents' emotional attachment to life by the sea (Rosenberg 1986; McDonald 2004). There is a sense of group dominance wherein Newfoundlanders feel they are second-class citizens resulting from acts of socio-economic marginalization and stereotyping by other Canadians (King and Clarke 2002).

This identity inevitably surfaced in media reports of *Idol* fanaticism. In 2003, updates about a Newfoundlander's progress in the competition tended to be limited to NTV (CTV's local affiliate), to VPCM radio and to the NTV-owned *Newfoundland Herald* news magazine. Afterwards the fifth-place Jenny Gear, of Carbonear, reflected on her peers' support: "When I was up there [in Toronto], I had never been as proud of being a Newfoundlander. Everywhere you turn, there is a Newfoundlander and they're supporting you" (Roberts 2003). The next season, Premier Williams attended a St. John's performance by Jason Greeley, who would place fourth, and George Street was temporarily renamed after the Upper Island Cove singer. There were complaints of voting being disrupted by jammed telephone systems and a schoolgirl with cancer was reduced to tears of joy on NTV when Greeley visited her star-struck classmates.

By 2005 all of Newfoundland's media outlets were treating *Idol* voting results as hard news. Many residents — notably children and awestruck middle aged women — were seemingly transfixed by Burlington contestant Rex Goudie, who would place second.<sup>5</sup> Fans overwhelmed phone circuits by continuously voting at pay-phones and the premier attended the season's final episode in Toronto. The telegenic Goudie praised his homeland after being greeted with a hero's welcome upon his return: "It's all because of Newfoundland being home ... whatever happens to

me, Newfoundland will always be home to me” (Canadian Press 2005). A year later 800 people lined up in St. John’s for an autographed copy of a biography of the young man, which itself touches upon feelings of political isolation in Canada:

Imagine how Newfoundlanders must have felt when one of their own stood on national television and wore the pink, white and green Republic of Newfoundland flag on his T-shirt for all of Canada to see. It was a shout from the mountain top that said, ‘Here I am. I’m a Newfoundlander and I’m darn proud of it,’ despite *Idol* judge Zack Werner’s unapologetic comment about requiring an interpreter to understand Rex.

(Kielley 2006, 45)

Interestingly, no such interest emerged for online voting to support Goudie’s debut album to win a Juno music award or for NTV’s local knockoff *Karaoke Idol* series. Nevertheless, the next season the local news featured organizers who bussed dozens of supporters 90 kilometers into St. John’s to vote from payphones for Craig Sharpe, who would also place second (CBC News 2006). This time Premier Williams was joined in Toronto by other politicians including the province’s federal cabinet minister, Loyola Hearn, while half of the 2,000 residents in Sharpe’s hometown gathered in an Upper Island Cove community centre filled with homemade signs to watch the final episode. The premier and his minister of tourism praised the “incredible talent” in Newfoundland and declared how “very proud” they were of this “role model” who had represented the province “wonderfully on the national stage” (Newfoundland and Labrador 2006). The next day, callers to VOCM agreed with the show’s host that the voting system was “rigged,” that it was designed to prevent a Newfoundlander from winning and that Newfoundlanders were outnumbered (Canadian Press 2006).<sup>6</sup> Newfoundlanders’ activism persisted in 2007 when motorcades in the Gander area celebrated Tara Oram’s inclusion in *Idol*’s “Top 22” finalists. The same thing happened each time she moved on to the next round until she eventually placed sixth.<sup>7</sup> Media convergence continued when amateur video of such celebrations was posted on the online file sharing website *You Tube*. Local interest waned considerably in 2008, although VOCM continued to provide weekly updates about the progress of Portugal Cove’s Mark Day until he finished seventh, and the group “Canadian Idol Contestant MARK DAY!!!” recorded nearly 2,000 members on the social networking website *Facebook*.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Exploratory qualitative research should provide indications of political nationalism underlying Newfoundlanders’ support for local *Idol* contestants. We might find that the availability of televoting is not the main reason why people vote;



rather, it facilitates viewers' desire to support one of their own. It is possible that *Idol* viewers in Newfoundland are ambivalent about federal elections and politics generally. Finally, although the young singers hope to entice the public to vote for them, we might find that they are unlikely to see themselves as future politicians.

I conducted intercept interviews and naturalistic observation at the *Canadian Idol* auditions held on 4 April 2007 at the Village Shopping Centre in St. John's. This was one of the 11 cities across eight provinces visited by the "2007 Canadian Idol Easy Access Tour." Advance publicity for these auditions included a local "Media Idol" contest. Upon arriving at the Village Mall, singers aged 16 to 28 registered for the competition by completing release forms and by providing identification. They then wore a wrist tag while waiting until their number was called. The atmosphere was upbeat. Large television screens displayed past episodes of the show and broadcast popular music. Contestants waited in designated areas, stood in a winding line, or sat on the floor playing guitars. Many attendees were usually smiling, sometimes bursting into song, and typically in continuous conversation. Others seemed nervous and kept to themselves; one was observed vomiting in a washroom. The CTV staff was helpful and the security guards seemed at ease. Television crews filmed some of the happenings, which were also observed by dozens of curious passersby. Overall, the proceedings were orderly yet friendly, and competitive but not adversarial. Three hundred youth (of more than 10,000 across Canada) auditioned in St. John's, 26 of whom moved on to the next round, and four (of 198 nationwide) were awarded a "golden ticket" to audition in Toronto. One such candidate was observed screaming and crying in excitement among her friends at the Village.

Amidst this backdrop, I approached attendees who appeared to be at least 18 years of age, asked them to fill out a research screening questionnaire and gave them an information sheet. This screening process probed *Canadian Idol* viewing habits, demographic information, participation in federal elections, and what they liked most about the program. To capture a variety of viewpoints, 30 respondents (21 females, 9 males) across three cohorts then completed semi-structured interviews in the mall. Adult females who said that they vote on *Canadian Idol*, youth aged 18-28 who were auditioning, and adult fans aged 50 years and older (Table 2) were invited to share their views.<sup>8</sup> This breakdown was based on indications that the *Idol* format targets women and youth.

Each interviewee was asked to comment on the audition event and the *Idol* series generally. This was followed by some open-ended questions about politics. Members of the female *Idol* voters cohort were asked how much trust they placed in *Idol* contestants, if they felt there was a difference between an *Idol* contestant and a federal election contestant asking for their vote, and whether they would vote for *Idol* if they had to visit a federal polling station to do so instead of televoting. Members of the contestant cohort were asked to describe why they wanted to be selected for the



program, how they might go about auditioning to become an election candidate, and whether they would want to run in a Canadian federal election. Respondents within the older fans cohort were asked how the province's *Idol* finalists had made them feel, how their Members of Parliament (MPs) had made them feel during the same time period, and whether there was anything about *Canadian Idol* that they preferred over politics.

The negative attitudes that were expressed towards federal politics were likely exacerbated by the latest volley in a high profile federal-provincial dispute. The exploratory interviews were conducted the day after Premier Williams held a news conference to discuss the federal government's retaliatory advertising that had denounced his claims concerning the 2007 federal budget, equalization payments and offshore oil revenues (CBC News 2007). As well, the cover of that week's *Newfoundland Herald* depicted Williams under the headline, "The Fighting Newfoundlanders: Has Ottawa betrayed us AGAIN?"

**Table 2**  
**Intercept Interview Cohorts Criteria**

Criteria	Female Idol Voters	Idol Contestants	Older Fans
Age	18+	18-28	50+
Gender	Female only	—	—
Interest in <i>Idol</i>	Voter in household	Auditioning	Watched and/or voted
Federal voter	Rarely or no	—	—

## FINDINGS

### *Attitudes Towards TV's Canadian Idol*

People attending *Canadian Idol* auditions obviously had a heightened interest in the series but many of the respondents in St. John's also professed an enjoyment of music and singing. Contestants liked to perform and to entertain, such as by teaching music lessons, participating in a choir, being part of a band, hosting karaoke at a bar, or just singing in the shower. "I love to sing," gushed one contestant, "It's my life." Likewise some viewers had been involved in music activities since childhood and continued to play guitar. Their enjoyment in watching talented young amateurs and the variety of musical styles was enhanced by the humorous auditions and judges' critiques. Their interest in the televised competition slowly increased and they became excited to cheer on contestants.

Attention to *Canadian Idol* often spread within a reference group. For some respondents, watching was "a family thing," with parents and children gathering to-

gether. During performances some chatted on the telephone with a parent, sibling or friend who was also watching. Couples may have tuned in together while others did so alone or with a group of girlfriends. The contest was discussed in the workplace, including lotteries wherein each coworker paid a dollar, picked a contestant, and won the pot of money if they predicted the winning singer.

The chance for young people to begin a musical career was perhaps the most stated attraction to *Idol*. The competition offered exposure to industry professionals whom are otherwise inaccessible to these young people. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity for ordinary yet gifted “kids” to pursue their dream of becoming a music star. Emotional connections were developed with personable contestants who were seen to be humble, honest and fresh. As one respondent put it: “they have real feelings just like the rest of us. Just voting for that person helps them with their self-esteem. People actually do like them, actually do care about them.”

### *Interest in Federal Politics*

Conversations about governance were alarmingly glum. Respondents’ cheerful demeanour changed sharply at the mention of politics and particularly of federalism. Older respondents became standoffish; some began cursing. *Idol* contestants on the other hand usually had no response when asked about politics. Among all cohorts there was a profound lack of interest in federal politics, frustration with the federal government and/or poor attitudes towards MPs or politicians. Time-honoured complaints were heard: all governments are the same, promises are broken, politicians lie, there are scandals. *Canadian Idol* and music, at least, were easy to understand.

For some respondents there was a detachment from federal matters in particular. They lamented that decision-making was remote and that the province was ignored. (As one *Idol* voter put it, “They’re still not looking at Newfoundland, they’re still calling us the poor province.”) Many were frustrated that party politics inhibit the individualism that was so prolific on *Idol*. Political organizations were seen to stifle personalities and ideas because they oblige candidates to promote the party’s mantra. Many respondents mentioned that in politics they prioritized candidate differences and felt that *Idol* was more inclusive. Moreover, *Canadian Idol* was about fun, whereas politics was seen to be a serious matter. Yet some clearly felt a civic duty to exercise their “democratic right” to vote in federal elections. Some felt, for instance, that complaining about politics is only legitimate if the complainer votes. Others recognized that people had fought to protect the franchise. Other respondents would only state that politics was unimportant to them.

Respondents’ attitudes towards elected officials were similarly negative. Politicians “are all the same,” they “say what they think you’d like to hear,” and they “speak out of two sides of their face.” Newfoundland’s MPs were believed to be un-

patriotic and underhanded. There was resentment about the recent federal budget and towards governing Conservatives who balanced regionalism with federalism instead of singularly promoting the province's interests. Members of Parliament were snooty characters who were often "on their high horse" or were "just there." Politicians had controversial backgrounds or personal baggage whereas, as one fan put it, *Idol* candidates had not "learned how to be a crook yet."

*Political Undertones in Idol Interest*

This common frustration with federal politics was exceeded by the patriotism associated with supporting a *Canadian Idol* contestant who was one of respondents' "own." Singers at the mall were believed to embody a considerable depth of talent in Newfoundland and Labrador. There was a strong sense of community and Newfoundlanders were said to be one big "family." Some went out of their way to watch television when a Newfoundlander was performing and they enjoyed being able to "help" by voting. A contestant's success stimulated feelings of being a respected member of the Canadian federation and fostered a sense of pride. The mainland music industry, it was reasoned, would have no choice but to pay attention to local skills.

It's the old Newfoundland pride. You know, they're native sons or daughters that are there so you want to boost them along as well as you can. (Don, older *Idol* fan)

It seems that we're just in the distance most of the time and right now Canadian Idol's doing more to put us on the map than anything else.... We're part of Canada now, in the Canadian Idol context of things, right? (Garry, older *Idol* fan)

We're finally being recognized. Not just Eskimos and igloos. We're actually people who are talented, you know? (Marie, older *Idol* fan)

Nevertheless, even among *Idol* aficionados, the unanimity of regional interest and support that had been conveyed in the mass media was not detected. Some respondents said that they had voted for the most talented performer regardless of birthplace. Some did not take the contest seriously, believing that it was a "fad," and that the "mania" associated with it was "blown out of proportion." *Idol* contestants were sometimes particularly grounded, feeling that *Idol* was "a farce," that it was purely entertainment and that it existed primarily to make money for CTV. One respondent was annoyed that fellow citizens treated *Idol* singers as unofficial Newfoundland ambassadors.

As we might expect from this respondent pool, the interest in *Idol* voting was strong and respondents' comments suggest that quantitative research might establish three types of such voters. Participation ranged from experimenting with voting (which we might provisionally call 'trial voters'), to regularly voting from

home each week with multiple phones ('habitual voters'), to mimicking a political organization ('fanatical voters'). Trial voters were nonchalant about the need to vote and seemed motivated by a fleeting personal stimulation, "a great feeling," as one put it. Their sudden burst of excitement to dial occurred only after more pressing lifestyle matters were dealt with; children or a spouse might have first gone to bed, for instance. Frustrations with receiving a busy signal may have turned them off altogether after a few attempts, thus preventing them from ever voting, or as often as they initially had hoped. Some of these viewers may have experimented with text message voting. As with non-voting viewers they also hypothesized about who was likely to move on or be eliminated.

Televoting was a routine weekly activity for habitual voters. Spouses or entire families may have voted dozens of times from both home phones and cellular phones. This persisted throughout the two hour voting period and, because of this, receiving a busy signal became an accepted, although inconvenient, part of the game. Viewers were thrilled by the sustained excitement, the social aspects of the process, and from feeling a part of popular culture. Fanatical voters were particularly determined to propel their candidate to victory. They obsessively pressed the redial button on their handset(s) because of the busy signals.<sup>9</sup> Such voters may have operated two phones at the same time or may have collaborated in groups of three or more. It is not uncommon for fanatics to rally others (McKee 2002) and some respondents indicated that they voted for the Newfoundland candidate without even watching the performances. As reported in the news, some such fans (including one respondent) voted in groups at public payphones, since they perceived that chances of getting through were improved by avoiding a community telephone line circuit.

We're up there, redial, redial, redial.... When you can't get through, you just hang up, and try again. (Linda, *Idol* voter)

My son, my daughter, and myself [vote]. If my husband's home, he'll dial the fourth [phone]. (Marlene, *Idol* voter)

Last year [in Grand Falls] we went to the payphones, same thing they did here [in St. John's] ... Oh my God, I think there were 15 or so of us. We all got together, we knew people were going, and we went together. (Ashley, *Idol* voter)

The principal benefit of voting from home was said to be convenience, particularly for shut-ins. Yet there were concerns that televoting in a general election could be similarly frustrating, that it would not be private and that it would be boring: "It's fun voting in *Idol*. Politics is not. At all," said one fan. Some questioned the legitimacy of a process whereby people could vote hundreds of times. All voting respondents were genuinely bothered that the lines were regularly jammed. Some conspiracy theorists wondered if the phone companies had an "agenda" to prevent

Newfoundlanders' calls from getting through; one respondent lamented: "There doesn't seem to be that problem in Upper Canada."

*Idol Contestants and Elections*

If *Idol* contestants seek votes, then do they aspire to run for elected office? Auditioning for *Canadian Idol* offered respondents an opportunity to overcome fear of rejection, to confront stage fright and to experience an adrenaline rush. Support from reference groups was important. Many had been encouraged to participate by friends, by family (particularly mothers) and even by strangers who had heard them sing. Sometimes relatives accompanied those auditioning; in one case, parents and grandparents had flown in with a candidate from Labrador. The "glitz and the glam" of the production "hype" and the potential to become "the next big thing" were attractive. Perhaps they dreamt of building on their local recognition from playing in a band, of being able to pay for a sibling's education, or even of becoming a millionaire. Some wanted to stay in a mansion and were keen about a trip to Canada's largest city. Toronto "would be so fantastic, so exciting," said one.

This desire to travel is telling because, rather than being preoccupied with fame, *Idol* candidates seemed interested in experiencing a life journey and learning about the music industry. Contestants were applying for a dynamic new job that could meaningfully improve their lives and help them mature. This was a thrilling opportunity to perform and have their talent evaluated. Sometimes there was a personal challenge brought on by being previously cut from auditions or being in the last year of eligibility. The overall enthusiasm can be summarized by one contestant's belief that "obviously nothing negative" could result from the audition.

The young adults interviewed were by no means political. There were a few comments that success on *Canadian Idol* might enable them to improve society or to "do good for the world." But mostly they could not speculate on how to audition to become a federal election candidate — "I don't know" and "I'm not really sure" were typical responses — or even comment on the possibility. Researching online or asking friends about how to become politically involved was mentioned, but contacting a political party, speaking with a politician or staffer, seeking the local nomination, or communicating with Elections Canada was never suggested.

So, contestant respondents were confident enough to audition for a public singing competition and yet could not imagine a way to seek public office. They wanted adulation for being themselves and cringed at competing political opinions. These citizens felt politically excluded, uninformed and uninterested: "Like, I wouldn't be able to locate places on a map or anything," said one. Political voting was not a priority and they worried about discussing politics with people who were more informed. They tended to perceive that government was "a bunch of crooks"

and that politics involved “hotheaded people” talking about matters that had no direct impact on youth.

## DISCUSSION

From a rational choice perspective it may seem perplexing that *Idol* enthusiasts would bother to vote since their action is unlikely to determine who moves on to the next round. But voting is part of the entertainment experience and induces pleasure which is immaterial to the outcome. There is a low opportunity cost to vote by phone and singers present a clearer choice than the tradeoffs in a political election. Some *Idol* voters’ support for a homegrown contestant is so entrenched that the quality of the singing performance matters less than where the singer is from. Some likely feel peer pressure from members of their social class or ethnicity to support a regional contestant. *Idol* voters may therefore behave as a mobilized group due to a perceived ethical duty to support one of their own. Such engagement has lead Williams (2005, 639) to propose that TV voting dramas allow viewers to express “anxieties of democratic governance that are ordinarily silenced in political discourse” (also van Zoonen 2005). This may help them build social capital that brings people closer together and contributes to their well-being. Conversely non-viewers, *Idol* viewers who do not vote, and even sporadic *Idol* voters have less information, and so are therefore rationally less interested and less motivated.

Audience voting may also reflect populist desires for direct democracy such as referenda and citizen forums. Pluralistic mass media forums such as talk radio and *Idol* embody populism because they allow the masses to participate and to circumvent the establishment. They connect with their audiences by using colloquial speech whereas politicians lean on bureaucratic buzzwords (Coleman 2004). In *Idol*’s case, structured power is taken away from the music industry elites and contestants are cool populists who represent a disenfranchised group of amateurs whose talents would otherwise go unnoticed.

We can make tentative political inferences about young candidates, civic engagement, televoting and regionalism. The potential for contestants’ “upwards social mobility” described by Coutas (2006, 373) is legitimized by audience voting that is perceived as promoting contestants based primarily on merit, when in reality there may be latent political motivations. Likewise, contestants interviewed in St. John’s viewed the auditioning process as a good opportunity and had often been encouraged by parents to explore a musical career. That the music industry’s power structure is crumbling amid online file sharing and declining sales seems inconsequential.

This sample suggests that a number of *Idol* viewers, at least in Newfoundland, are political dropouts. Candidates in particular were drawn to participate in a national challenge, yet they did not exhibit a sense of civic duty. *Idol* is a short-term friendly

singing competition, where talented performers receive suggestions for improvement while being publicly glorified, whereas politics was seen to involve a stressful, long-term conflict of ideas amidst public scrutiny. The viewing public may be encouraged to select candidates based on their individual talents; however, party-like behaviour emerges among the blocs of viewers who vote repeatedly for a regional contestant. Here there are similarities with party members' brand loyalty, competitive behaviour, socialization and shared accomplishments. It is also a bit of a puzzle that politicians tend to work towards improving society, yet they come across as primarily self-interested, whereas *Idol* contestants seek purely personal rewards yet appear to do this on behalf of others. It is also ironic that respondents who behaved politically in response to *Idol* expressed such a disdain for politics. This reflects popular culture's portrayal of politicians as villains and reality TV contestants as heroes.

Televoting is probably only a small reason why some people vote for an *Idol* candidate. There are similarities here with the Reform party's teledemocracy efforts in the early 1990s, which engaged some disenchanted Westerners in federal politics and provided them with an ability to circumvent the establishment (Barney 1996). But a voting process that uses technology is likely to only be taken advantage of by existing voters (Milner 2007); many viewers, not to mention the millions of non-viewers, still do not dial in. Unless CTV releases detailed voting statistics we cannot draw any conclusions on participation rates although, as in the Nova Scotia Liberal party's 1992 leadership selection process (Carty 1996), many more votes could likely be received with improvements to telephone circuitry.

Finally, the passion for *Canadian Idol* in some segments of society should not be underestimated or dismissed by academics. Citizens watching commercial television tend to exhibit weaker political knowledge and to use video for entertainment, leading Putnam (2000, 230) to surmise that viewers are "isolated, passive, and detached from their communities." Such beliefs are outdated if they assume that television is a one-way medium. A participatory TV show can have a significant civic engagement function and can foster social capital. Watching can be a group activity, can become a topic of conversation within reference groups and can be especially attractive to music lovers. The *Idol* format can apparently encourage some couch potatoes, and increasingly mouse potatoes, to exhibit civic pride.

## CONCLUSION

This preliminary research supports an overall hypothesis that voting in reality television programs such as *Canadian Idol* can have political underpinnings in jurisdictions with strong localized identities. The Newfoundland case suggests that even apolitical viewers of *Idol* may unconsciously engage in political behaviour as they exhibit community pride. Young contestants may be the least politically minded which is symptomatic of their cohort.



Musical performances can have a positive effect on voting and political attitudes: look no further than the bump in opinion polls that the federal Conservatives immediately experienced after Prime Minister Stephen Harper, in an *Idol*-like manner, sang a Beatles tune while playing the piano at the National Arts Centre in October 2009. For political scientists, audience participation programs are a significant opportunity to study non-voters who do, in fact, vote; apolitical youth who seek votes; and viewers' political identity. Statistical research is needed to assess this case study's findings. Audience participation programming appears to be a promising avenue for building knowledge about political protesters, about political dropouts and about future electors. Residents' low participation in federal elections and their strong interest in reality television contests signify that Newfoundland and Labrador would be a good place for further study.

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup>By comparison, during the week of the 2004 federal election, 1.67 million viewers tuned in to *Canadian Idol* while 1.61 million watched the CBC's coverage of the election results (Attallah 2004).

<sup>2</sup>This type of response has existed elsewhere as well. More people voted in Britain's *Big Brother* series than in the 1999 European Parliament elections (Kilborn 2003) and young Americans have been considerably more capable of naming an *Idol* winner than identifying which political parties held power at the state or congressional levels (Kurtzk et al. 2003). It has also been estimated that up to three-quarters of *Idol* calls in some US markets do not get through ("Idol voting" 2004).

<sup>3</sup>Coleman's (2003) study of *Big Brother* found that a majority of "political junkies" were male, over 50 years old, working professionals, and identified with a particular religion, whereas a majority of *Big Brother*'s viewers were female, under 40 years old, and were not religious.

<sup>4</sup>Twice as many Newfoundlanders listen to the participatory medium of talk radio than do listeners in any other province (Statistics Canada 2007).

<sup>5</sup>The author was personally subjected at the time to a passionate argument by a Newfoundland woman who insisted that Goudie had more star power than Canadian singing icon Bryan Adams.

<sup>6</sup>This is similar to suggestions that a Quebec contestant was defeated in 2003 because she was a francophone from a community that supported sovereignty in the 1995 Quebec referendum. Cynicism about the vote count and problems with the voting process also exists in the United States (Jenkins 2006).

<sup>7</sup>Since July 2008 Oram's struggles to deal with post-*Idol* life have been profiled in *The Tara Diaries* series on Country Music Television.

<sup>8</sup>Ten interviews were completed in each cohort to provide directional insights in preparation for a future quantitative study. Approximately two dozen interviews, or until new information is no longer forthcoming, is generally considered sufficient for such research.

<sup>9</sup>Jenkins (2006) has suggested that people talking with each other about the show is partly responsible for increased phone call volume during voting hours.



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